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Editorial: Eschatology, Time and Space

Alexander Chow

In his famous commentary on Romans, Karl Barth expositors Romans 8:24-25 and explains that, without eschatological hope: 'there is no freedom, but only imprisonment; no grace, but only condemnation and corruption; no divine guidance, but only fate; no God, but only a mirror of unredeemed humanity.'¹ For this Swiss theologian, Christianity void of 'restless eschatology' is Christianity void of a relationship with Christ and a new life offered by the Holy Spirit. Eschatological hope is the basis for Christian salvation and offers a reason to strive and a reason to change – to change oneself and to change one's surrounding world. Most commonly, eschatology is understood in terms of the dimension of time. But for others, eschatology reorients understandings of the dimension of space. The four articles in this issue of *Studies in World Christianity* engages this overarching subject of Christian eschatology, but also how different contexts develop understandings of eschatology in terms of time and space.

In our lead article, Andrew Walls traverses history to explore the eschatological themes in Protestant missions. During the Reformation, the early Protestant identification of the papacy with the antichrist provided a key impetus for

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314.

missions. However, instead of a focus on converting non-Christian lands, the call for Protestants at the time was to convert Christian lands through moral and spiritual renewal. This would shift for some through the encounter with non-Western peoples and the growing belief that their conversion offered an optimism that the last days were near. This would shift again as premillennial thinking offered Evangelicalism a more pessimistic outlook on the world and the church. In each of these encounters and in each of these phases, eschatology provides different reasons to change the surrounding world through missions.

Whereas our first article is by a historian focusing on mission history, our second article is by a theologian focusing on contextual theology. Alexander Chow picks up where Walls left off by examining how eschatology has been received by Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In many cases, this involved the reinterpretation of Christianity in preexisting religious and philosophical idioms. In all cases, indigenous understandings of eschatology gravitated towards different understandings of temporality, whether it be an orientation towards the future, a relevance to the present, or an interest in the past. Chow concludes by noting that Christian eschatology, seen from a global perspective, has both temporal and corporate dimensions.

Emily Dunn's article focuses on one of the most well-known recent cases of an indigenous reinterpretation of Christian eschatology: the Chinese new religious group, the Church of Almighty God (also known as Eastern Lightning). Many commentators have noted the similarities between this group and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom a century and a half earlier, as well as with Buddhist and Daoist millenarian groups of medieval China. However, Dunn argues that such comparisons with these antecedents are superficial. She contends that a close reading of the teachings of the Church of Almighty God suggests less of an adaptation of preexistent Chinese religiosity and more of an innovative, albeit idiosyncratic evolution of Christianity in China today.

In our final article, Josiah Baker shifts our attention away from temporality and focuses on spatiality in his discussion of Native American Christianity. Baker shows how the traditional interests in spatial constructs have been reinterpreted through an encounter with Christianity to form a Christian theology of space. This theological outlook prioritises one's relationship with creation and a concern for bringing about cosmic harmony and locational peace. Eschatologically, the Native American Christian theology of space often results in a realised eschatology whereby the riches of the Kingdom of God are seen as already fully available in the present.

In each of our articles, we are offered broad and particular readings of 'restless eschatology'. Even more, they show how the dimensions of time and space in Christianity have been interpreted and reinterpreted throughout time and space.